Who killed Martin Luther King?

Convicted assassin James Earl Ray claims he was innocent dupe of murder conspiracy

By Christopher Sullivan
The Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — James Earl Ray will awaken on the U.S. Martin Luther King holiday Monday in his cell, a concrete cube with no bars and a 10-centimetre-wide glass slit for a window. Then, he'll go to work.

The man serving 99 years at Riverbend Maximum Security Institution as King's assassin will resume his quest to prove he is innocent, a claim he repeats in a new autobiography and in a prison interview.

Ray now combs the prison law library for a legal way out. He's filed a string of lawsuits seeking investigative documents to build his case and is shopping for a judge who will order a trial.

Once in court, he vows to prove he was a dupe of a mysterious middleman named "Raoul" in one of the most spectacular murder conspiracies of the century.

Ray's new book, *Who Killed Martin Luther King?*, makes a case that his original guilty plea was coerced and that he was never anything more than "a two-bit career criminal."

"Why," he writes, "if official America is so firmly convinced that I pulled the trigger of the rifle that killed Martin Luther King, is there so much reluctance to allow me to have a trial and fully air the evidence?"

Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s untiring travels to the flashpoints of the U.S. civil rights movement won him the Nobel Peace Prize in 1964 — and in early April 1968 took him to Memphis, where sanitation workers, most of them black, were striking for better pay and an end to discrimination.

He stirred a crowd with a speech that's memorized by American children now, declaring, "I've been to the mountaintop. . . I'm not fearing ning yet another demonstration, he prepared for dinner, then stepped on to his balcony at the Lorraine Motel.

— File photo

New book: Ray hopes authorities will grant him a trial

As King stood alone there at 6:01 p.m., a single rifle shot struck him in the head.

Investigators tracing aliases and following leads across continents arrested James Earl Ray in London in June. Within a year of the assassination , on March 10, 1969, Ray pleaded guilty to King's killing.

In his new book, Ray now calls the court proceeding a sham, but this sentiment is not new.

Then-U.S. Attorney General Ramsey Clark had said immediately after the shooting that a lone assassin killed King; there was no evidence of a conspiracy. But even as he pleaded guilty, Ray told the judge: "The only thing that I have to say is that I can't agree with Mr. Clark."

There was a conspiracy, concluded the House of Representatives select committee on assassinations nine years later. In 1978, its report based on a two-year investigation said Ray shot King, but that a St. Louis-based conspiracy of racial bigots was behind the killing.

Ray complains that the committee cut short his testimony and misrepresented what he said.

U.S. Rep. Louis Stokes, who chaired the committee, denies that, saying Ray's book fails "to clear up all the inconsistencies that I developed during my cross-examination of him."

Stokes defends the investigation as thorough and exhaustive, despite challenges to its central conclusion.

"Highly speculative," says Philip Melanson, an archivist and researcher who has studied the King case for years.

The committee also concluded that no federal, state or local agency was involved in King's killing — notably exonerating the FBI, whose campaign of spying on, threatening and attempting to discredit King was well-documented.

"I have always believed that the government was part of a conspiracy, either directly or indirectly, to assassinate him," says Rev. Jesse Jackson.

The comment by Jackson, who was among those with King when he died, comes in a foreword to Ray's book, written at the publisher's request.

Ray, Jackson says, "may or may not have been part of the conspiracy. . . Where I do agree with James Earl Ray is that he deserves a full and fair trial, and the American people deserve to know the truth."

Jackson also endorses Ray's call for a federal special prosecutor and the unsealing of committee investigative records that now are closed to the public until the year 2029.

The book's 285 pages only hint at answers to the question of who killed King: Meyer Lansky and others in organized crime? Shadowy individuals at the other end of Louisiana phone numbers he was given by "Raoul"?

Many who have interviewed Ray — including those who believe his claim of innocence — sense that he's hiding some of what he knows.

Melanson believes Ray was helped by several people before and after the assassination, but thinks he was kept at arm's length by the principal conspirators.

"He could have been recruited by people who were on the fringe," said Melanso. "I don't know that he was entrusted with enough information ... that he could provide specifics that would solve the case."

At the prison, Ray was coy in his responses to some questions — about the sources of aliases that turned out to belong to real people he didn't know, for example, or about new evidence he might present at trial.

He was asked if he was revealing only enough to tantalize the public and get back into court but not enough to endanger himself by giving away conspirators' identities.

"No, I don't think there's anything to that," said Ray. "This case is 23 years old. The only problems I've had were at Brushy Mountain prison," where he was stabbed by inmates in 1981.

Among the things he does discuss is his guilty plea. He entered it, he says, only after being subjected to solitary confinement for months in a cell with constant surveillance.